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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6171
INFO RUEHZS/ASEAN COLLECTIVE
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 1335

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS; GENEVA FOR RMA

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SUBJECT: CAMBODIAN PM DISMISSES TWO CO-MINISTERS;
NATIONAL ASSEMBLY PASSES CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Citing the need for greater efficiency in Cambodia's bloated bureaucracy, Prime Minister Hun Sen removed two FUNCINPEC officials as co-ministers of Defense and Interior on March 2. (Since 1993, the PM's Cambodian People's Party and the Royalist FUNCINPEC party have shared co-ministers of Defense and Interior portfolios, even though the FUNCINPEC officials have held little real authority.) Also March 2, the National Assembly overwhelmingly passed a constitutional amendment proposed by the opposition that would permit formation of a government with a 50 percent plus one majority vote in the National Assembly, replacing the former 2/3 majority requirement. The latter step is intended to avoid extended stalemates after elections, as occurred in 1998 and 2003. End Summary.

PM Removes FUNCINPEC Co-Ministers of Interior and Defense

¶2. (U) On March 2, PM Hun Sen told reporters he had removed FUNCINPEC senior officials Prince Norodom Sirivudh and Nhek Bunchhay as co-Ministers of Interior and Defense, respectively. The two will retain their posts as deputy prime ministers. Hun Sen said the removals were a step towards improving government efficiency, noting that government officials within the military and police no longer would belong to any political party. He further explained that, in the future, RGC officials would no longer represent their parties, but rather the government, and that the party quota system in Cambodian governments was at an end.

¶3. (U) The PM said he did not expect the move to produce any difficulties in his coalition with FUNCINPEC and predicted that, if FUNCINPEC leader Prince Norodom Ranariddh proposed leaving the government, his party members would not join him. The PM added that he would welcome FUNCINPEC officials into the CPP, should anyone want to defect. Nhek Bunchhay did not protest his removal and agreed that getting rid of the co-ministers would expedite the work of the MOD. However, FUNCINPEC MP Monh Saphan later told reporters the removal of the two FUNCINPEC officials was a breach of the 2004 CPP-FUNCINPEC agreement to create a governing coalition. There was also speculation that Prince Ranariddh, president of the National Assembly, might also be removed as co-chairman of the Council for Development of Cambodia, which manages foreign investment.

National Assembly Passes Amendment

¶4. (U) On March 2, 96 of 97 MPs present voted in favor of an opposition-proposed constitutional amendment permitting the formation of governments through a 50 percent plus one majority of the National Assembly. MPs of all three parties supported the draft. CPP DPM Sok An defended the amendment in National Assembly full-floor debate. Opposition leader Sam Rainsy also told the NA that the amendment would prevent the types of political deadlock Cambodia had experienced following each election and would be another step towards reaching a true democracy in Cambodia, which he said also required independent and efficient legislative, judicial, administrative, and security institutions.

Comment

¶5. (SBU) Rumors regarding possible removals of FUNCINPEC officials and entry into government of opposition officials have been circulating since Rainsy's recent return and his reconciliation with Hun Sen. Although they voted for the amendment, FUNCINPEC officials reportedly were concerned about the potential diminution of their party's influence as the CPP has the requisite 50% plus one votes on its own. It is still unclear whether the change will permit the CPP to shake off its FUNCINPEC coalition partner before the next national elections in 2008, or whether Hun Sen will invite SRP members into government, although the CPP and SRP are clearly flirting with such a possibility. The constitutional amendment holds the potential to permit one party to rule on its own. However, the former 2/3 majority requirement - instituted during the Paris Peace Accord negotiations in 1991 to foster national reconciliation - increasingly seemed out of date. On balance, the reform seems a step toward a more normally functioning democracy in Cambodia.